

## **Walking Backwards through Brassai: death, magic and love**

This is a script constructed around a gallery walk that I led for the exhibition 'Brassai: The Soul of Paris', (22 February – 13 May 2001, Hayward Gallery London).

### **Characters**

Louis Aragon

Gaston Bachelard

Roland Barthes

Walter Benjamin

André Breton

Rosi Braidotti

Siegfried Kracauer

Luce Irigaray

Paul Morand

Georg Simmel

George Perec

Jane Rendell

### **Prologue.**

**Jane Rendell:** I'm interested in the places we through when walking, the spaces between departure and arrival, and the links that one makes when travelling back and forth between various sites. In contemporary urban and architectural discourse, we seem to be increasingly obsessed by figures which traverse space: the flâneur, the spy, the detective, the prostitute. The literary flâneur, or city stroller, in his role as man of the crowd and detached observer of city life has been a central motif in discussions of urban experience – through movement the flâneur maps space. A trope among postmodern critics, the flâneur first appears in Charles Baudelaire's poems of 1850's Paris, but features most famously as a dialectical image in the work of cultural critic Walter Benjamin. The flâneur represents for me urban explorations, passages of revelation, journeys of discovery – what

In my own work, inspired by a desire to 'know' the past as a woman, to understand the gendering of architectural space, I have been following the Rambler, a figure who roamed the streets of early-nineteenth-century London, prefiguring the more famous Parisian flâneur. The verb 'to ramble' describes incoherent movement, 'to wander in discourse (spoken or written): to write or talk incoherently or without natural sequence of ideas'. As a mode of movement, rambling is unrestrained, random and distracted: 'a walk (formerly any excursion or journey) without any definite route or pleasure'. In the early nineteenth century, the verb specifically described the exploration of urban space, only later, by 1879, was the term rambling associated with planned rural excursions.

An urban activity generated through the pursuit of pleasure, rambling involved visits to places of leisure – assembly rooms, opera houses and theatres, parks, clubs, sporting, drinking venues, shopping streets. Ramblers were young, single, heterosexual men in search of women. I feel that Brassai has much in common

with the ramblers, his fascination with the delights of the city at night has produced a particular mapping of Paris, his photographs are a sexual topography.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to make connections between Brassai and his contemporaries, especially the work of the surrealists, such as Andre Breton, in whose text *Mad Love* some of Brassai's photographs were published. There were also fellow urban night-time ramblers, such as Henry Miller, whose *Tropic of Cancer* (1934), talks of many of the same streets and places in Paris that Brassai visited, and indeed some of their rambling was done together. There are also connections to be made with French critics writing later in the century, the work of Roland Barthes, especially on love and the city as multiple sites of desire, is very close to Brassai's work. And juxtaposing the writing of feminist critics such as Luce Irigaray and Rosi Braidotti, can create an interesting literary montage, dealing with similar themes as Brassai – mirrors, femininity, artifice, identity – but from very different positions.

What follows is a walk through Brassai's work, but I want to start here with the found images of Graffiti (1933-6) and move backwards through the work. . .

### **Act 1: from cave wall to factory wall**

**Jane Rendell:** These are all pieces of graffiti Brassai found and photographed between 1933 and 1936. He then categorised them according to nine different themes, such as love, magic, death and primitive images, which provide a map to the city that can be read as both modern and archaic at the same time.

[Move to stand in front of the set of images entitled 'Death', pick up the copy of Walter Benjamin, 'Unpacking my Library', *Illuminations*, London: Fontana Press, 1992, and read from page 62].

**Walter Benjamin:** Thus there is in the life of a collector a dialectical tension between the poles of disorder and order. Naturally, his existence is tied to many other things as well: to a very mysterious relationship to ownership [...] also, to a relationship to objects which does not emphasize their functional, utilitarian value – that is, their usefulness – but studies and loves them as the scene, the stage, of their fate. The most profound enchantment for the collector is the locking of individual items within a magic circle in which they are fixed as the final thrill, the thrill of acquisition, passes over them.

[Put down *Illuminations* in front of the images entitled 'Magic'. Move now to stand in front of the set of images entitled 'Love'. Pick up the copy of Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, London: Penguin Books, 1990 and read from page 3].

**Roland Barthes:** What is proposed, then, is a portrait – not a psychological portrait; instead, a structural one which offers the reader a discursive site: the site of someone speaking within himself, amorously, confronting the other (the loved object), who does not speak.

### 1. Figures

Dis-cursus – originally the action of running here and there, comings and goings, measures taken, ‘plots and plans’: the lover, in fact, cannot keep his mind from racing, taking new measures and plotting against himself. His discourse exists only in outbursts of language, which occur at the whim of trivial, of aleatory circumstances. These fragments of discourse can be called figures. The word is to be understood, not in its rhetorical sense, but rather in its gymnastic or choreographic acceptance [...] the body’s gesture caught in action and not contemplated in repose. [...] The figure is the lover at work. (pp. 3-4).

[turn to page 52 and read]

**Roland Barthes:** The Heart

coeur/heart.

This word refers to all kinds of movements and desires, but what is constant is that the heart is constituted into a gift object – whether ignored or rejected.

1. The heart is the organ of desire (the heart swells, weakens, etc., like the sexual organs), as it is held, enchanted, within the domain of the Image-repertoire. What will the world, what will the other do with my desire? That is the anxiety in which are gathered all the heart’s movements, all the heart’s ‘problems’. (p. 52)

[Close the copy of *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, but keep hold of it. Move to stand in front of the images entitled ‘Primitive Images’. Pick up the copy of Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, (1927-39), (trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin), Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999 and read from page 460].

**Walter Benjamin:** Method of this project: literary montage. I needn’t say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse – these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them.

[Turn to page 464 and carry on reading]

**Walter Benjamin:** In the dialectical image, what has been within a particular epoch is always, simultaneously, ‘what has been from time immemorial’. As such, however, it is manifest, on each occasion, only to a quite specific epoch – namely, the one in which humanity, rubbing it’s eyes, recognizes just this particular dream image as such. It is at this moment that the historian takes up, with regard to that image, the task of dream interpretation. [...] The realization of dream elements in the course of waking up is the canon of dialectics. It is paradigmatic for the thinker and binding for the historian.

[Close the copy of *The Arcades Project* but keep hold of it along with *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments* and leave this exhibition space. Turn around and walk across to the staircase, go up it and enter the second room, walk through it to the row of photographs along the back wall, to the left hand corner.]

## **Act 2: Animate Objects**

**Jane Rendell:** Most of the work in this room comes before and after Brassai’s work as a photographer of the city. Some of the early images have strong surrealist tendencies and locate magical or animate qualities in

found objects. Much of the later the work derives from the years of the second World War where Brassai remained in Paris and was banned from taking images of the streets. Instead he made painting and sculptures of women, inspired no doubt by his contact with Picasso during his cubist phase.

[Walk along this wall, past 'Circumstantial Magic', (1931), and 'Involuntary Sculptures', (1932-3), to stand in front of 'The House where I Live', (1932). Pick up the copy of André Breton, *Mad Love*, (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1987) and read from pages 19-20.]

**André Breton:** 'What do you consider the essential encounter of your life? To what extent did this encounter seem to you, and does it seem to you now, to be fortuitous or foreordained?'

It was in these terms that Paul Eluard and I opened an inquiry whose results the journal *Minotaure* printed. At the moment of printing the answers, I felt I had to make more precise the meaning of these two questions as well as to draw some provisional conclusions about the group of opinions that had been expressed.

[Turn back to pages 11-5 and carry on reading. Pausing on page 12 to look at the photograph taken by Brassai.]

**André Breton:** But it is completely apart from these accidental figurations that I am led to compose a eulogy to crystal. There could be no higher artistic teaching than that of the crystal. The work of art, just like any fragment of human life is considered in its deepest meaning, seems to me devoid of value if it does not offer the hardness, the rigidity, the regularity, the luster on very interior and exterior facet, of the crystal. Please understand that this affirmation is constantly and categorically opposed, for me, to everything that attempts, esthetically or morally, to found beauty on a willed work of voluntary perfection that humans must desire to do. On the contrary, I have never stopped advocating creation, spontaneous action, insofar as the crystal, nonperfectible by definition, is the perfect example of it. The house where I live, my life, what I write: I dream that all that might appear from far off like these cubes of rock salt look close up.

[...]

In any case, what is delightful here is the dissimilarity itself which exists between the object wished for and *the object found*. This *trouvaille*, whether it be artistic, scientific, philosophic, or as useless as anything, is enough to undo the beauty of everything beside it. In it alone can we recognize the marvelous precipitate of desire. [...]

You only have to know how to get along in the labyrinth. Interpretive delirium begins only when man, ill-prepared, is taken by sudden fear in the *forest of symbols*.

**Jane Rendell:** When Brassai moved to Paris from his home town of Brassai in Hungary he named himself after the place he came from.

[Put down *Mad Love*. Walk back around the central cabinet, looking the painting of female nudes, such as 'Mandarin Woman', 'Fruit Woman', 'Amphora Woman', and past the photographs of female nudes on the right hand wall, to pause at the image at the end of the wall, 'False Sky: I and II' (1932). Pick up the copy of Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994 and read from pages 3-5.]

**Jane Rendell:** In these images, one is not confronted with the female nude as an object, even if it is a body in part, but rather one can disappear into the landscape of the body.

**Rosi Braidotti:** The starting point for most feminist redefinitions of subjectivity is a new form of materialism, one that develops the notion of corporeal materiality by emphasizing the embodied and therefore sexual differentiated structure of the speaking subject. Consequently, rethinking the bodily roots of subjectivity is the starting point for the epistemological project of nomadism.

[Put down *Nomadic Subjects*. Walk through the next exhibition space, and down the stairs into the room containing the photographs from *The Secret Paris of the 30's*. Pause at the bottom of the stairs.]

### **Room 3: Secret Life of Paris**

**Jane Rendell:** This room contains photographs taken by Brassai in the 1930's and published as Brassai, *The Secret Paris of the 30's*, (trans. Richard Miller), London: Thames and Hudson, 1976. The places shown are 'sites of desire': music halls, bars, brothels, spaces of private intimacy in public. These places where private and public become blurred are often considered to be sites of transgression in the city, where the dominant cultural codes of behaviour governing sex, love and marriage are overturned. Comparisons can be made with the figure prostitute – considered by many theorists and historians to be the archetypal public woman or *fille publique*.

[Walk over to the series of four photographs on the wall to your left, 'Lover's Tiff, Rue Saint-Denis', (1931). Open the copy of *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* and read from page 204.]

### **Roland Barthes: Making Scenes**

scene/scene

The figure comprehends every 'scene' (in the household sense of the term) as an exchange of reciprocal contestations.

1. When two subjects argue according to a set exchange of remarks and with a view to having the 'last word', these two subjects are *already* married: for them the scene is the exercise of a right, the practice of a language of which they are co-owners; *each one in his turn*, says the scene, which means: *never you without me*, and reciprocally. This is the meaning of what is euphemistically called *dialogue*: not to listen to each other, but to submit in common to an egalitarian principle of the distribution of language goods. The partners know that the confrontation in which they are engaged, and which will not separate them, is as inconsequential as a perverse form of pleasure (the scene is a way of taking pleasure without the risk of having children).

**Jane Rendell:** Brassai is fond of putting together a series of images around a theme, such as 'Lover's Tiff, Rue Saint-Denis', (1931), as well as the four images comprising 'the Balloon Seller', (1931) and 'A Man dies in the Street, Boulevard de la Glaciere', (1932). It is very hard to make out any form of coherent and progressive narrative in these images. Indeed they tend to confuse a narrative reading, providing more of a montage of an event, where the viewer is encouraged to make a number of different and sometimes contradictory conclusions about the characters, their motives and the story-line, based on what they can see.

[Walk across the room, to the opposite wall, to 'Couple in a taxi', (1936). Turn the pages of *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* to page 105 and read.]

**Roland Barthes:** In the loving calm of your arms

étreinte/embrace: The gesture of the amorous embrace seems to fulfill, for a time, the subject's dream of total union with the loved being.

3. A moment of affirmation; for a certain time, though a finite one, a *deranged* interval, something has been successful: I have been fulfilled (all my desires abolished by the plentitude of their satisfaction): fulfillment does exist, and I shall keep on making it return: through all the meanderings of my amorous history, I shall persist in wanting to rediscover, to renew the contradiction – the contraction – of the two embraces.

[Walk across the room diagonally to the centre of the left hand wall, to the series of photographs entitled 'At Suzy's', (1932). Pause in front of the two images at the far left hand end of the sequence showing the man and woman/prostitute and client in bed. Turn to pages 225-6 in *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* and read.]

**Roland Barthes:** Tenderness

tendresse/tenderness

Bliss, but also a disturbing evaluation of the loved object's tender gestures, insofar as the subject realizes that he is not their privileged recipient.

Sexual pleasure is not metonymic: once taken, it is cut off: it was the Feast, always terminated and instituted only by a temporary, supervised lifting of the prohibition. Tenderness, in the contrary, is nothing but an infinite, insatiable metonymy; the gesture, the episode of tenderness (the delicious harmony of an evening) can only be interrupted with laceration: everything seems called into question once again: return of rhythm – *vritti* – disappearance of *nirvana*.

[...]

(‘L was stupified to see A give the waitress in the Bavarian restaurant, while ordering his schnitzel, the same tender look, the same angelic expression that moved him so when these expressions were addressed to him’.)

[Put down *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*. Pick up Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, (1977), (trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke), Ithaca: Cornell, 1985. Read from page 186.]

**Luce Irigaray:** The *prostitute* remains to be considered. Explicitly condemned by the social order, she is implicitly tolerated. No doubt because the break between usage and exchange is, in her case, less clear-cut? In her case, the qualities of woman's body are 'useful'. However, these qualities have 'value' only because they have already been appropriated by a man, and because they serve as a locus of relations – hidden ones- between men. Prostitution amounts to *usage that is exchanged*. Usage that is not merely potential: it has already been realized. The woman's body is valuable because it has already been used. In the extreme case, the more it has served, the more it is worth. Not because its natural assets have been put to use this way, but, on the contrary, because its nature has been 'used up' and has become once again no more than a vehicle for relations among men.

[Put down *This Sex Which Is Not One*, and pick up Luce Irigaray, *To be Two*, (1994), (trans. Monique M. Rhodes and Marco F. Cocito-Monoc, London: Athlone, 2000). Turn around, walk back across the room again diagonally, to the photograph in the far corner of the left hand wall, 'Lovers in a Small Café near the Place d'Italie' (1932). Read from page 26].

**Luce Irigaray:** The caress is a gesture-word which penetrates into the realm of intimacy with the self in a privileged space-time. It is a gesture which goes beyond the civil cloak or border of a proper identity, which exceeds the right to exist as a subject with one's own gender: a male or a female subject.

**Paul Morand:** Tokyo has a Yoshiwara; Shanghai, its flower boats; Paris, its 'houses of illusion'. (from image 25 of Brassai, *Paris after Dark*, (1933), 64 photographs, text by Paul Morand.)

**Jane Rendell:** Juxtaposing these series of images of lovers in cafés with prostitutes and clients in brothels, all caught in amorous encounters, makes them harder to read and to judge. At what point is a loving embrace an gesture exchanged for cash? Only if we know the setting are we comfortable that we 'know' the nature of the caress presented to us. What complicates things further, is that Brassai was in the habit of staging many of the scenes that he photographed, particularly those in brothels...

[Put down *To be Two* and walk along, three images to your left, to the photograph taken in 'Bal Musette des Quatre-Saisons, Rue de Lappe', (1932).]

[Open the copy of *The Arcades Project* you are holding and read from pages 537-8].

**Walter Benjamin:** Paris is the city of mirrors. The asphalt of its roadways smooth as glass, and at the entrance to all the bistros glass partitions. A profusion of windowpanes and mirrors in cafés, so as to make the inside brighter and to give all the nooks and crannies, into which Parisian taverns separate, a pleasing amplitude. Women here look at themselves more than elsewhere, and from this comes the distinctive beauty of the Parisienne. Before any man catches sight of her, she already sees herself ten times reflected. But the man, too, sees his own physiognomy flash by. He gains his image more quickly here than elsewhere and also sees himself more quickly merged with this, his image. Even the eyes of passersby are veiled mirrors, and over the wide bed of the Seine, over Paris, the sky is spread out like the crystal mirror hanging over the drab beds in brothels.

[Keep hold of *The Arcades Project* and turn around. Walk across the room to the wall opposite to the images at the left hand end of 'Bal Musette des Quatre-Saisons, Rue de Lappe', (1932).]

**Jane Rendell:** La Bal Musette des Quatre Saisons was a popular music hall in Paris in the 1930's. It is an interesting place, for it does not quite fit into the set divisions between respectable and disreputable. Dance Halls were not in the same category as brothels; yet the rules were quite clear - single women who accepted a dance from a man, were expected to go home with them. Brassai's series of images picks up the complexity of the relations being formed between men and women, from the reflections in the mirrors set behind and above the seats in the dance hall. In one, he captures the reflection of a woman held in an embrace, in others the image in the mirrors shows sets of three, two men and one woman, two women and one man. Three is a number that in terms of sexual encounter suggests transgression, something beyond the courting of a heterosexual couple falling in love, even if money is not changing hands.

[Walk around the corner to the right, to 'At Suzy's', (1932), to an image of a woman looking at herself in the mirror. Pick up Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, (1984), (trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Burke), London: The Athlone Press, 1993 and read from page 11].

**Luce Irigaray:** In the meantime this ethical question comes into play in matters of *nudity* and *peversity*. Woman must be nude because she is not situated, does not situate herself in her place. Her clothes, her makeup, and her jewels are the things with which she tries to create her container(s), her envelope(s). She cannot make use of the envelope that she is, and must create artificial ones.

[Put down *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* and turnaround. Walk across to the centre of the wall on your left, to 'Two Hirondelles', (1931). Read from page 492 of *The Arcades Project*.]

**Walter Benjamin:** 'Hirondelles- women who work the window'. Levic-Torca, *Paris-Noceur*, (Paris, 1910), p. 142. The windows in the upper story of the arcades are choir lofts in which the angels that men call 'swallows' are nesting.

**Paul Morand:** Stealthily the cyclist police patrol the empty street. Their capes float after them like wings and they blow their whistles on the least provocation, hence the nickname 'swallows' which the populace has given them. (from image 28 of Brassai, *Paris after Dark*, (1933), 64 photographs, text by Paul Morand.)

[Put down the *The Arcades Project*, Now pick up Iain Borden and Jane Rendell (eds.), *InterSections*, London: Routledge, 2000 and read from Jane Rendell, ' "Serpentine allurements": Disorderly Bodies/Disorderly Spaces' page 255.]

**Jane Rendell:** Moving was also a defining feature of the cyprian. Cyprians were described as 'lady birds' having 'lightness and mobility of spirit' or 'energy of body and spirit'. The names of cyprians spotted by rambles in the park corresponded to birds, such as the Sparrow Hawk and the White Crow. Their mobility defined in terms of lightness and flightiness referred to their moral constitution – their 'moral frailty' – as well as their ability to move.

[...]

The cyprian was an urban peripatetic – a nymph of the pavé. Her mobility in the public places of the city was a cause of concern. Her link to the street, as streetwalker or nightwalker, associated her with the lowest class of prostitute. Whereas the movement of the Rambler, his active engagement in the constant pursuit of pleasure, was celebrated as urban exploration; the mobility of the cyprian was represented as the cause of her eventual destruction. Her movement was transgressive, blurring the boundaries between public and private, suggesting the uncontrollability of women in the city. The cyprian body was perceived as disorderly, because as a moving female public body, it flouted patriarchal rules for women's occupation of space.

[Put down *Intersections*, and move along to your left, to the 'Rue de Lappe', (1932). Pick up Walter Benjamin, *One Way Street and other Writings*, London: Verso, 1992, and read from page 301.]

**Walter Benjamin:** There is no doubt, at any rate, that a feeling of crossing the threshold of one's class for the first time has a part in the almost unequalled fascination of publicly accosting a whore in the street. At the beginning, however, this was a crossing of frontiers not only social but topographical, in the sense that whole networks of streets were opened up under the auspices of prostitution. But is it really a crossing, is it not, rather, an obstinate and voluptuous hovering on the brink, a hesitation that has its most cogent motive in the circumstance that beyond this frontier lies nothingness. But the places are countless in the great cities where one stands on the edge of a void, and the whores in the doorways of tenement blocks and on the less sonorous asphalt of railway platforms are like the household goddesses of this cult of nothingness.

[Keep hold of the copy of *One Way Street* and move to the next image on the left, 'Rue Quincampoix' (1932).]

**Paul Morand:** Venus of the Street - Woman on the corner of Rue de la Reynie. A young prostitute, one of the tribe that roam the streets between the 'Sébastos' (Boulevard de Sébastopol) and the old Beaubourg quarter, is standing at the angle of the Rue de la Reynie and Rue Quincampoix, a little street famed, in the reign of Louis XV, as the headquarters of the eighteenth-century financier John Law. (from image 28 of Brassai, *Paris after Dark*, (1933), 64 photographs, text by Paul Morand.)

[Pick up Henry Miller, *The Tropic of Cancer*, London: Flamingo, 1993 and read from page 166.]

**Henry Miller:** I have never seen a place like Paris for varieties of sexual provender. As soon as a woman looses a front tooth or an eye or a leg she goes on the loose. In America she'd starve to death if she had nothing to recommend her but a mutilation. Here it is different. A missing tooth or a nose eaten away or a fallen womb, any misfortune that aggravates the natural homeliness of the female, seems to be regarded as an added spice, a stimulant for the jaded appetites of the male.

[Move along again to the right, to 'The Pick-up near Les Halles' (1932). Turn to pages 183-4 of *The Tropic of Cancer* and read.]

**Henry Miller:** 'Why don't you show me that Paris,' she said, 'that you have written about?' One thing I know, that at the recollection of these words I suddenly realized the impossibility of ever revealing to her that Paris which I had gotten to know, the Paris whose arrondissements are undefined, a Paris that has never existed except by virtue of my loneliness, my hunger for her. Such a huge Paris! It would take lifetime to explore it again. This Paris, to which I alone had the key, hardly lends itself to a tour, even with the best of intentions; it is a Paris that has to be lived, that has to be experienced each day in a thousand different forms of torture, a Paris that grows inside you like a cancer, and grows and grows until you are eaten away by it.

**Paul Morand:** Near les Halles, the peristyle of the Bourse de Commerce – as this view – taken at 2am discloses – shelters a host of *clochards*, modern counterparts of the medieval *truands*. Venus of the Street - Woman on the corner of Rue de la Reynie. (from image 26 of Brassai, *Paris after Dark*, (1933), 64 photographs, text by Paul Morand.)

[Turn to page 211 and carry on reading.]

**Henry Miller:** Paris is like a whore. From a distance she seems ravishing, you can't wait until you have her in your arms. And five minutes later you feel empty, disgusted with yourself. You feel tricked.

[Turn back to page 193 and read.]

**Henry Miller:** Then one day I fell in with a photographer, he was making a collection of the slimey joints of Paris for some degenerate in Munich. He wanted to know if I would pose for him. [...] We didn't go to the places familiar to the tourists, but to the little joints where the atmosphere was more congenial, where we could play a game of cards in the afternoon before getting down to work. He was a good companion, the photographer. He knew the city inside out, the walls particularly [...]

[Put down *The Tropic of Cancer* and walk to the left and around the corner to 'The Introduction at Suzy's, Rue Gregor-de-Tour', (1932). Pick up Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, Boston: Exact Change, 1994 and read from page 103.]

**Louis Aragon:** The door opens in reply to the bell, and the madam, an ageing raddled blonde, urges you to come in. It is ten francs, and whatever you like to the little lady. Crossing the minute waiting room, where two is already a crowd, you can hear the sound of voices coming from your right, but you are lead to the left along a dark corridor, watch out, there's a step, the door and there you are in the room. Come, Ladies!

[Put down *Paris Peasant*, move to your right back around the corner to 'Conchita and the Marines', (1933) and pick-up Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1969 and read from page 127.]

**Jane Rendell:** Conchita was a woman renowned for her beauty, nick-named 'Her Majesty: Woman' who performed at the fair of Saint Jacques in the 'tableaux vivant' at Place d'Italie.

**Gaston Bachelard:** Indeed the principle of solidification is so powerful, the conquest of hardness is carried so far, that the shell achieves its enamel-like beauty as though it had been helped by fire.

**Jane Rendell:** Cast your mind back to the set of photographs in the previous room, entitled 'Impromptu Sculptures' and especially to the one entitled 'Shell', (1933).

[Hold on to *The Poetics of Space* and walk through into the final room pausing in the doorway].

#### **Act 4: Paris by Night**

**Jane Rendell:** This room contains some of the photographs that Brassai published as *Paris by Night*. The images here are of Paris at night, mainly taken outside. Unlike *Secret Paris*, the interest is not of a sexual nature, but in a rather ordinary Paris usually unpopulated by people. Eugene Atget's work springs to mind, the hundreds of photographs he also took of an empty Paris at the turn of the century. Atget's work has interested theorists and critics from Benjamin onwards, for their ability to speak of 'the scene of the crime', to present to the viewer traces of an activity that once happened here, that we may only guess at. Many of Brassai's images although devoid of people depict animate objects, so that rather than ask us to solve the enigma of an invisible history that has already taken place, appear to have no time. Brassai favours architectural archetypes, like towers, gates and bridges. Such places are analogous to physis spaces, to

encounters between people, to meetings and separations, to the edges and overlaps between people and places.

[Read from pages 250-1 of *One Way Street*]

**Walter Benjamin:** Atget almost always passed by the 'great sights and the so-called landmarks'; what he did not pass by was a long row of boot lasts; or the Paris courtyards, where from night to morning the hand-carts stand in serried ranks; or the tables after people have finished eating and left, the dishes not yet cleared away – as they exist in hundreds of thousands at the same hour; or the brothel at Rue...No 5, whose street number appears, gigantic, at four different places on the building's façade. Remarkably however, almost all these pictures are empty.

[Put down *One Way Street* and walk across to the wall on your right, to 'The Caravans, Boulevard Aragon' (1935-8) and then further to the left to 'Street Fair, Place St. Jacques', (1945). Pick up Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, (trans. Thomas Y. Levin), Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995, and read from page 41.]

**Paul Morand:** From autumn to late spring great travelling fairs regale the various districts of the capital with their lights and hubub. (from image 22 of Brassai, *Paris after Dark*, (1933), 64 photographs, text by Paul Morand.)

**Siegfried Kracauer:** On Saturday afternoons the avenue St. Ouan is a fair ground. Not that the fair simply set itself up here like a travelling circus; rather, the avenue was pregnant with it and brings forth the fair from within itself

[Now put down *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays* and walk across the room to the centre of the wall opposite, to the series of images of men sleeping on benches, take a close look at 'Sleeping Man wearing a Boater' (1934). Pick up Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, and read from page 35.]

**Walter Benjamin:** Once a writer had entered the market place, he looked around as in a diorama. A special literary genre has preserved his first attempts at orienting himself. It is a panorama literature. [...] These books consist of individual sketches which, as it were, reproduce the plastic foreground of those panoramas with their anecdotal form and extensive background of the panoramas with their store of information. [...] These were the salon attire of a literature which fundamentally was designed to be sold in the streets. In this literature, the modest-looking, paperbound, pocket-size volumes called 'physiologies' had pride of place. They investigated types that might be encountered by a persons taking a look at the marketplace. From the itinerant street vendour of the boulevards to the dandy in the foyer of the opera-house, there was not a figure of Paris life that was not sketched by a *physiologue*.

[Put down *Charles Baudelaire*, and move to your right around the corner to the series of images of bridges, 'The Pont Marie', (1931-2), 'Pont de Grenelle', (1930-2), stopping in front of 'The Passerelle des Arts and Pont Neuf', (1930). Pick up Georg Simmel, 'Bridge and Door', and read from page 6.]

**Georg Simmel:** The bridge becomes an aesthetic value insofar as it accomplishes the connection between what was separated not only in reality and in order to fulfil practical goals, but in making it directly visible.

**Paul Morand:** On the calm surface of the Seine tugboats and barges are resting for the night beside Pont-Neuf, the oldest bridge in Paris. (from image 5 of Brassai, *Paris after Dark*, (1933), 64 photographs, text by Paul Morand.)

[Put down 'Bridge and Door', and move around the corner to the right. Pause in front of 'The Jardin du Luxembourg', (1935), and pick up Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and other Pieces*, London: Penguin Books, 1997 and read from page 37.]

**Georges Perec:** Doors. We protect ourselves, we barricade ourselves in. Doors stop and separate. The door breaks space in two, splits it, prevents osmosis, imposes a partition. On one side, me and *my place*, the private, the domestic (a space overfilled with my possessions: my bed, my carpet, my table, my typewriter, my books, my old copies of the *Nouvelle Revue Française*); on the other side, other people, the world, the public, politics. You can't simply let yourself slide from one into the other, can't pass from one to the other, neither in one direction nor in the other. You have to have the password, have to cross the threshold, have to show your credentials, have to communicate, just as the prisoner communicates with the world outside.

[...]How to be specific? It's not a matter of opening or not opening the door, not a matter of 'leaving the key in the door'. The problem isn't whether or not there are keys: if there wasn't a door, there wouldn't be a key.

[Put down *Species of Spaces and other Pieces*, and move back to your left around the corner, past 'Eiffel Tower Illuminated for the 1937 International Exhibition', (1937) and 'Morris Pillars', (1934).

**Paul Morand:** In the subdued light of a 'Morris Pillar' Paris offers its various entertainments, with, as usual, Mistinguett writ large. (from image 10 of Brassai, *Paris after Dark*, (1933), 64 photographs, text by Paul Morand.)

**Jane Rendell:** Morris Pillars or Wallace Fountains were also urinals, of which there were 1500 in Paris.

**Paul Morand:** The concealed lighting and the surrounding darkness, the soft hiss of a gas-jet and the gentle plash of running water combine to lend a bizarre, imponderable charm to the stark ugliness of this 'Vespasienne'. (from image 11 of Brassai, *Paris after Dark*, (1933), 64 photographs, text by Paul Morand.)

[Cross the room to the opposite wall. Stand in front of 'Tour St. Jacques (1932-3). After looking at the image for a few moments, read *from The Poetics of Space* page 25]

**Gaston Bachelard:** A tower is the creation of another century. Without a past it is nothing. Indeed a new tower would be ridiculous. But we still have books, and they give our day-dreams countless dwelling places. Is there one among us who has not spent romantic moments in the tower of a book he has read?

[Put down the *The Poetics of Space*. Walk back through room three up the stairs and into the second room to the place where you put down the copy of *Mad Love* in front of 'The House where I live', (1932). Pick up the book, look at the image of the Tour Saint-Jacques on page 48 by Brassai. Turn back to page 47 and read.]

**André Breton:** I was near you again my beautiful wanderer, and you showed me in passing, the Tour Saint-Jacques under its pale scaffolding, rendering it for some time now the world's great monument to the hidden. You know how I loved that tower: yet I see now again a whole violent existence forming around it to include us, to contain wildness itself in its gallop of clouds about us:

In Paris the Tour Saint-Jacques swaying  
Like a sunflower.

[Walk to your right and put down *Mad Love* in front of 'Circumstantial Magic' (1931). Walk back into the first room to stand in front of the graffiti images entitled 'Magic'. Pick up the copy of *Illuminations* and read from page again from page 62]

**Walter Benjamin:** Thus there is in the life of a collector a dialectical tension between the poles of disorder and order. Naturally, his existence is tied to many other things as well: to a very mysterious relationship to ownership [...] also, to a relationship to objects which does not emphasize their functional, utilitarian value – that is, their usefulness – but studies and loves them as the scene, the stage, of their fate. The most profound enchantment for the collector is the locking of individual items within a magic circle in which they are fixed as the final thrill, the thrill of acquisition, passes over them.

[Put down *Illuminations* and leave the gallery.]

## Epilogue

**André Breton:** This object was an old engraving which seen straight on, represents a tiger, but which, regarded perpendicularly to its surface of tiny vertical bands when you stand several feet to the left, represents a vase, and, from several feet to the right, an angel. (André Breton, *Nadja*, (1928), (trans. Richard Howard), New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1960, p. 59)

**Walter Benjamin:** In other respects Breton's book illustrates well a number of the basic characteristics of this 'profane illumination'. He calls *Nadja* 'a book with a banging door. [...] The dialectics of intoxication are indeed curious. [...] The lady, in esoteric love, matters least. So, too, for Bréton. he is closer to the things that *Nadja* is close to than to her. [...] They bring the immense forces of 'atmosphere' concealed in these things to the point of explosion. (Walter Benjamin, *One Way Street and other Writings*, London: Verso, 1992, pp. 228-9.)

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